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2020-02-12

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Katainen , A , Kauppila , E , Svensson , J , Lindeman , M & Hellman , M 2020 , ' Regulating  
alcohol marketing on social media : outcomes and limitations of marketing restrictions of  
pyFinland s 2015 Alcohol Act ' , Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs  
py39 46 . <https://doi.org/10.15288/jsad.2020.81.39>

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/317041>

<https://doi.org/10.15288/jsad.2020.81.39>

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Running head: KATAINEN ET AL.

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## **Regulating Alcohol Marketing on Social Media: Outcomes and Limitations of Marketing Restrictions of Finland's 2015 Alcohol Act**

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Received: September 19, 2018. Revision: September 16, 2019.

This study has received funding from the Academy of Finland (Grant Number 305856), Systembolagets Forskningsråd, and The Finnish Foundation for Alcohol Studies.

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The aim of this study was to assess the effectiveness of the 2015 law restricting alcohol marketing on social media in Finland. **Method:** The study compared posts that market alcohol on Finnish and Swedish social media in terms of number, content, and user engagement during the month of January in three separate years: 1 year before, 1 year after, and 2 years after the 2015 Alcohol Act came into effect in Finland. The data consisted of all posts (Finland,  $N = 1,536$ ; Sweden,  $N = 1,204$ ) published during the selected months by alcohol brands that had active national social media accounts at the time of data collection. The coding protocol included numbers of posts and measures of consumer engagement, as well as content restricted by the law. **Results:** Social media posting increased between the 2014 and 2016 samples in both countries. In Finland, the number of posts decreased in 2017. The proportion of posts with content restricted by the 2015 law increased in both countries between the 2014 and 2016 samples. However, in Finland, the amount of restricted content decreased in the 2017 sample, whereas in Sweden it increased, Pearson  $\chi^2(1) = 29.273, p < .001$ . The level of user engagement increased in both countries between the 2014 and 2017 samples. **Conclusions:** The social media regulation in the Finnish 2015 amendment has had an impact on alcohol brands' social media content, but it has not affected marketers' ability to increase consumer engagement. (*J. Stud. Alcohol Drugs, 81, 000–000, 2020*)

SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES (SNS) have become important forums for alcohol marketing, especially in terms of reaching young consumers (Lobstein et al., 2017; McCreanor et al., 2013; Moraes et al., 2014). For alcohol marketers, SNS provide the means to increase brand visibility, enhance interaction with potential customers, and make alcoholic brands a part of everyday social interaction (Nicholls, 2012). Previous studies have shown that most global alcohol brands are actively present on SNS and invest substantially in marketing on these platforms (Alhabash et al., 2015). Moreover, minors are able to access this content, especially on YouTube and Twitter (Barry et al., 2015, 2016; Winpenny et al., 2014), and current regulatory mechanisms are insufficient to protect them (Jernigan & Rushman, 2014). Finland was the first country in the world to incorporate social media-specific regulation into its Alcohol Act. The amendment came into effect in 2015 and aims to limit the use of SNS for alcohol marketing purposes in order to protect minors and prevent adolescent alcohol use.

Advertising on social media comprises a range of strategies that aim to increase brand-related interaction with consumers (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Brand-related accounts are used for commercial communication and to build communities around brands and products (Habibi et al., 2014). Content can be either “organic” (reaching mainly account followers) or “sponsored,” whereby the social media service provider is paid to increase the visibility of the content, which then appears on users’ feeds according to selected targeting criteria, such as age, place of residence, gender, or interests (Carah et al., 2018). SNS enables users to engage with the content by liking, commenting, or sharing it. Through these reactions, users are involved in the distribution of marketing messages (Freeman et al., 2014). A key feature of social media is to provide a platform for storytelling and self-presentation (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Alcohol brands can be used as components in the construction of a self-image on SNS (Atkinson et al.,

2017), enabling consumers themselves to efficiently act as brand promoters (Carah, 2016; Griffiths & Casswell, 2010; van Dijck, 2013). Communication scholars have discussed whether, in this sense, interaction between consumers and brands can be viewed as exploitation when it serves commercial objectives (Fisher, 2015). Moreover, social media marketing blurs the boundaries between advertising and user-generated content, making it difficult for users to identify communications intended for commercial purposes (Nichols, 2012). These ethically problematic aspects of social media marketing were focal in the drafting of the 2015 amendment (Montonen & Tuominen, 2016).

The 2015 amendment restricts the use of SNS in alcohol marketing in three ways (see Montonen & Tuominen, 2016). First, it bans the use of games, lotteries, and competitions; and second, it prohibits using user-generated content in alcohol marketing. This means that alcohol marketers must not share users' visual and textual content, such as their uploaded pictures of drinking occasions, on their accounts or in their communication. Third, distributing alcohol marketing content that is intended to be shared by consumers is also prohibited. The wording of the law could be interpreted as a total ban on all alcohol marketing on social media, as, ultimately, all marketing content on social media is "intended to be shared." The goal of social media marketing is to gain visibility and enable interaction through content sharing and other user reactions (Brodmerkel & Carah, 2013). However, the government proposal explicitly states that the Finnish amendment is not intended to prohibit all alcohol-related commercial communication on social media. Instead, it aims to limit the use of social media marketing tools while enabling adults to obtain information on alcoholic beverages (Oikeusministeriö, 2013).

The 2015 amendment is internationally significant, as its impact on alcohol marketing provides essential information on the possibilities for regulating social media marketing in

general and in relation to potentially harmful products in particular. In this study, we examined whether Finnish alcohol brands and producers have adjusted their marketing communications and techniques on social media platforms after the amendment came into effect. Although the goal of the amendment was to prevent adolescents' exposure to alcohol marketing content on SNS, we did not measure adolescent exposure to marketing messages. Instead, we analyzed the actual alcohol marketing posts on brands' and producers' social media channels and assessed whether the amendment had affected the amount, content, and user engagement of these communications in Finland. Because the purpose of the amendment was to limit marketers' opportunities to use consumers as distributors of marketing messages, we examined the changes in active user engagement (i.e., whether consumer reactions to marketing posts decreased after the amendment came into effect). To assess the outcomes of marketing restrictions, we compared the Finnish case to Sweden, where no corresponding regulation has yet been introduced.

## **Method**

### *Design*

The research material consisted of social media posts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube by alcohol brands and producers operating in Finland and Sweden. The selected SNS are among the most popular platforms in Finland and Sweden and also globally (Werlin & Kokholm, 2017). They enable social networking and content sharing but have slightly different uses. Facebook is a tool for social networking, Instagram is typically used for image and video sharing, and YouTube is used solely for video sharing. Twitter, on the other hand, is a tool for "miniblogging" typically short textual content and links. The alcohol brands and producers included in the study were selected from members of the Swedish and Finnish brewing industry

associations and via sales statistics of the most popular alcoholic brands. From these lists we selected all the brands and producers that had active social media accounts with a Finnish/Swedish target audience from 2014 to 2017. The selection comprised 38 Finnish and 52 Swedish brands and producers and covered all major brands in the Finnish and Swedish market, as well as a selection of small-scale producers.

All content posted on social media accounts was archived in chronological order. We took screenshots of all posts published in January 2014 (1 year before the amendment), January 2016 (1 year after), and January 2017 (2 years after). We converted the screenshots into image files and assembled the basic information (e.g., the distribution platform, year, beverage type, and numbers of user reactions) in an Excel spreadsheet. In total, the data consisted of 1,536 posts from Finland and 1,204 posts from Sweden. The brands and producers may have paid the platforms to boost the visibility of their posts, but because this information is not publicly accessible, we did not know the proportion of “sponsored” posts.

We also collected the number of account followers at the time of data collection (spring 2017). The number of followers indicates an account’s popularity. Followers can be obtained by advertising the brand with sponsored posts or by producing content on SNS that causes users to spontaneously become interested in the brand (Carah et al., 2018). The number of followers does not automatically reflect how well marketing posts actually reach consumers. Users can view the content of an account without becoming a follower, all posts can be sponsored to reach a massive number of targeted social media users (depending on the marketing budget), or posts can “go viral” (i.e., get extensively shared throughout SNS). Because the number of followers was observed only in 2017, it was not possible to report changes in the audiences of these brands between 2014 and 2017.

*Measures and analysis*

The data were coded according to a content analytical scheme. The coding protocol was based on the 2015 amendment and the guidelines for alcohol marketers issued by the Finnish National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health (Valvira), which is responsible for enforcing the Alcohol Act. The Valvira guidelines (2018) were used to interpret the law and its application and were classified into the following codes:

- game (the post contains a link to a game);
- competition (the consumer is invited to take part in a competition);
- lottery (the consumer is invited to take part in a lottery);
- consumer content (the post shares content produced by a consumer);
- consumer picture (the comments contain a video or a picture related to the product that was produced and posted by a consumer);
- consumer recommendation (positive consumer feedback in the comments—this code only concerns comments on a post and not the actual post);
- share suggestion (the consumer is invited to share the post); and
- blogger consumer content (the post shares content produced by a blogger without stating that the marketer collaborated in the blog).

After compiling the code list, we carried out a preliminary round of coding in which the whole research team coded 20 posts together. Based on this preliminary round, the coding criteria were modified when necessary. The final coding was completed by three researchers. One Finnish-speaking researcher coded all of the Finnish material, and two Swedish-speaking researchers coded the Swedish material individually. The researchers marked all posts that they found difficult to classify, and these were discussed and coded later by the whole team.



The coding was evaluated by an external team of experts in a Delphi review (Babor et al., 2013; Helmer, 1967). Eight Swedish and Finnish experts in the fields of public health and alcohol research rated a sample of 20 posts according to the coding instructions in two assessment rounds. After the first round, the ratings were assembled, and, in the second round of assessment, the experts could reflect on and reconsider their own ratings in the light of those given by their colleagues. The purpose of the two-round assessment was to test the reliability of the study by comparing the two rounds of expert coding with the original coding by the research team. After the second round, all eight experts agreed with the original coding in 69% of the ratings (100% match between research team's rating and all eight expert ratings). In 87% of the ratings, six or more experts agreed with the original rating. The experts mostly disagreed on how to assess whether a suggestion to share was indicated in the posts—many of them suggested that the option to share (share function) should be rated as a sharing suggestion. The reviews were compiled and discussed by the team and the coding was revised according to the suggestions made by the expert panel. However, the presence of a share function was not coded as a share suggestion, because we wanted to detect the extent to which the brands explicitly encouraged users to distribute their content.

Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted using the statistical software SPSS version 25. In the analysis, we compared the two countries' content that contravened the restrictions of the 2015 amendment. All restricted content codes' totals were summed into a single variable to enable examination of the overall compliance of the posts with the marketing restrictions. The significance of the differences between the countries in terms of percentage was determined by a Pearson chi-square test. We calculated the ranges and averages of the users' reactions per post to compare consumer engagement and sharing at different times and between

the countries. Consumer engagement was calculated as the sum of shares, likes, comments, and retweets (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). *Consumer engagement* refers here to active engagement—when social media users actually do something with the marketing content (Hutton & Fosdick, 2011). Passive engagement, when users merely notice and view the content, could not be considered in this study design, as this information is not publicly available. The significance of the differences between and within the countries in terms of consumer engagement was established using a *t* test.

## Results

### *Frequency of posting*

Figure 1 shows that the number of alcohol marketing posts in Finland and Sweden nearly doubled from the January 2014 sample to the January 2016 sample. The Swedish brands' posting activity increased slightly from the 2016 to 2017 sample, whereas the number of posts by Finnish brands decreased.

### [Figure]

### *Use of restricted content*

Figure 2 shows that, in 2014, 22.5% of the Finnish posts and 20.2% of the Swedish posts contained elements that could be interpreted as contravening the Finnish restrictions. These posts shared consumer-generated content; used games, lotteries, or competitions; or suggested that users share posts. There were no significant differences between Finland and Sweden in the proportions of restricted content in the 2014 or 2016 samples. In 2017, however, the Swedish brands had a significantly higher proportion of posts containing restricted elements than the Finnish posts, Pearson  $\chi^2(1) = 29.273, p < .001$ . In the Finnish sample, 15.5% of the posts contained restricted content in 2017, whereas in the Swedish sample the percentage was 29.5%.

**[Figure 2]**

Figures 3 and 4 show that, over the sampled months, the studied brands and producers rarely used games, lotteries, and competitions in their marketing communications. Most commonly, the posts made use of consumer-generated content. According to the Valvira guidelines for Finnish alcohol marketers, *consumer-generated content* means textual and visual material that has been uploaded by a private social media user through their own accounts or by a blogger or influencer with no indication of commercial collaboration with the brand. According to the guidelines, alcohol marketers must also monitor consumer reactions to their posts and remove consumer-generated content, such as pictures and comments that can be seen as promoting the product. Consumer recommendations in the posts' comment sections were the most typical form of consumer-generated content in both countries. The proportion of posts sharing consumer-generated content increased in both countries from the 2014 sample to the 2016 sample. In the Swedish brands' accounts, the increase continued in the 2017 sample; in the Finnish sample, the proportion decreased.

**[Figures 3 and 4]***Changes in consumer engagement*

Table 1 shows a significant change within the countries in the level of consumer engagement from the 2014 sample to the 2017 sample, when all indicators of active consumer engagement (likes, shares, and comments) were considered. A large part of the studied posts engaged only a few consumers. The average number of consumer reactions per posts varied between 91 and 207 over the studied months in both countries. These numbers are relatively low considering the potential to reach and engage consumers through social media. Interestingly, the range of minimum and maximum numbers of user reactions increased from the 2014 sample to

the 2017 sample, indicating that, in 2017, alcohol marketers were more successful in engaging consumers in both countries compared with 2014. There were no significant differences in consumer engagement between the two countries in 2017.

#### **[Table 1]**

Because the 2015 amendment aims to prevent consumers from sharing alcohol marketing messages, we looked specifically at how often consumers shared this kind of content and whether this changed after 2015. According to the Valvira guidelines, alcohol marketers must remove the sharing option from posts if the service provider has enabled this. Also, consumers should not be encouraged to share alcohol marketing posts.

The number of shares is only visible on Facebook and Twitter posts. In both countries, the sharing of alcohol marketing posts on these platforms was, for the most part, minimal, as shown in Table 2. On average, the mean number of shares varied between 6 and 12 in Finland and 9 and 18 in Sweden over the studied months. The highest number of shares in a single post was 3,302 in Finland and 1,248 in Sweden. There were no significant differences between the countries or between sampled months within the countries in terms of sharing alcohol marketing posts.

#### **[Table 2]**

### **Discussion**

The results show that the new regulations had no immediate impact on social media alcohol marketing in Finland. Based on the 2014 and 2016 samples, the studied alcohol brands and producers considerably increased their alcohol-related commercial communication in both Finland and Sweden. During the study period, social media marketing increased globally (eMarketer, n.d.; Tuten & Solomon, 2017). However, we observed a decrease in the number of

posts in 2017 with simultaneous increase in user engagement, coinciding with previous studies on social media alcohol marketing (Carah et al., 2018; Jernigan & Rushman, 2014). According to previous studies, a decrease in the number of posts and concurrent increased engagement seems to indicate a more effective use of social media as a marketing platform.

In addition to the number of marketing messages, the proportion of posts that contained restricted content also increased in both countries from the 2014 to 2016 samples. Consequently, the amendment had no immediate impact on the Finnish brands' choices of social media marketing strategies. However, the use of restricted content by the studied Finnish brands decreased between the 2016 and 2017 samples, whereas in Sweden the proportion of posts with restricted content increased. The observed delay in the effect of regulatory changes might be because of the lack of media coverage and debate when the amendment came into effect. Other regulatory changes that took place at the same time, such as the ban of outdoor advertising of alcohol, were widely debated, whereas the social media amendment went largely unnoticed in the media. In addition, smaller producers with small-scale marketing activities may have been even less aware of the new regulations when communicating with consumers.

It seems likely that the decrease in consumer-generated content in the Finnish alcohol marketing posts is attributable to the regulations and that the amendment has, therefore, had an impact on the social media marketing techniques used by Finnish alcohol brands. The use of consumers as producers of marketing content has been recognized as a key element in building brand awareness and widening the consumer base on social media (Hanna et al., 2011). The Swedish accounts selected for this study have, accordingly, increased their use of consumer-generated content. However, it appears that the new law has not affected the most important aspect of social media marketing in terms of effectiveness: its success in engaging consumers.

Although the level of active consumer engagement in alcohol marketing content has been low in both countries, Finnish marketers engaged more users in the 2017 sample than in the 2014 sample. This indicates that the new regulations do not prevent alcohol marketers from generating engaging content for the purpose of social media communications and using the platforms efficiently in their marketing efforts.

On the whole, the Finnish and Swedish examples of social media alcohol marketing seem fairly moderate compared with that of those reported elsewhere (Lobstein et al., 2017). For instance, interactive games and competitions were only used on a few occasions in the studied samples. Moreover, the posts in the samples were relatively product oriented and did not use viral social media content beyond the branded content. Previous research has shown how alcohol producers strive to interact with young consumers to increase brand visibility in everyday communications and to create “intoxigenic digital spaces,” thereby normalizing alcohol consumption (Atkinson et al., 2017; Griffiths & Casswell, 2010; Gupta et al., 2016). A large proportion of the marketers included in this study had not been successful in generating such interaction. Without investing in greater consumer engagement, the effectiveness of advertising, especially on Facebook and Instagram, may even deteriorate; in 2018 both service providers reported that they would show more user-generated content in users’ newsfeeds at the expense of corporate-managed accounts (Facebook Newsroom, 2018).

The purpose of alcohol marketing restrictions is to reduce the exposure of alcohol marketing to consumers and prevent alcohol-related harm. The restrictions typically regulate the targeting and content of alcohol marketing, which makes the Finnish amendment internationally unique: it seeks to limit the means of advertising and focuses on how consumers are engaged in SNS. According to our results, the Finnish amendment and the way it is enforced faces several

difficulties that prevent efficient regulation. First, the amendment aims to limit the distribution of alcohol brand–authored commercial communications in environments that are built on the premise of content sharing. The algorithms that determine what kind of content social media users see in their feeds are constantly being developed by service providers to customize user experience and to enable marketers to use these platforms and target potential customers more efficiently (Carah et al., 2018). This is likely to lead to a higher level of engagement with marketing messages, while staying out of reach of national legislators. Second, it is likely that the amendment has not been communicated to alcohol marketers clearly enough. Third, enforcement of the amendment is also lacking, as Valvira has no resources to monitor social media and only processes cases that have been reported to them.

Moreover, even if marketers are aware of the regulations, the Valvira guidelines for how to apply them can be difficult to follow. In this study, interpreting consumer reactions and deciding whether they can be considered recommendations turned out to be problematic. The Delphi review experts also disagreed most in their interpretation of consumer comments. A clearer solution would be to completely prohibit commenting on alcohol marketing posts, meaning that alcohol marketers would be obliged to either prevent users from commenting or remove all consumer comments from posts.

It has been suggested that alcohol advertising on social media should be banned entirely (Hastings et al. 2010). The wording of the Finnish amendment would already enable a total ban: according to the amendment, alcohol marketers must not generate any content on social media that is intended to be shared. On the other hand, whether this kind of total ban could succeed in reality is doubtful (Nicholls, 2012).

The limitations of this study relate to the challenges of social media as a research subject. Social media is constantly changing and the ways in which it operates as an advertising medium are only partially visible. For example, it is impossible to distinguish between sponsored and organic posts when looking at brands' social media pages. It is also impossible to say, based on mere observations of posts, how frequent and widespread sponsored communications actually are. The data were only gathered for 1 month per year. The selected month, January, is generally a low-consumption month in both Finland and Sweden, which may have affected the prevalence of alcohol marketing posts in the periods studied. Only producers with active social media accounts throughout the research period were included. Although new active operators in the field are not part of this study, the data still cover all major brands in Finland and Sweden. Difficulties in interpreting the social media amendment to the Finnish Alcohol Act and the Valvira guidelines also affect the results. In this respect, the Delphi review strengthened the reliability of the study.

To our knowledge, this study is the first to evaluate the outcomes of attempts to regulate alcohol marketing on SNS. Further research is needed to investigate the long-term effects of restrictions, how they are applied in social media marketing, and how social media platforms and alcohol marketing strategies evolve in relation to the changing regulatory environment. Future research designs should especially focus on new social media platforms, changes in how user newsfeeds are customized, and new forms of influencer marketing.

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TABLE 1. Changes in user engagement in all posts in Finland and Sweden 2014–2017

User engagement (shares, retweets, likes, comments)							
Country	Year	Posts ( <i>n</i> )	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Sig1*	Sig2**
Finland	2017	536	0–13,620	135.8	731.74	.087	.001
	2016	626	0–5,233	90.66	331.14	.001	.001
	2014	374	0–2,975	128.8	211.27	.001	
Sweden	2017	491	0–8,158	207.1	586.88		.001
	2016	480	0–6,823	188.4	631.45		.003
	2014	233	0–2,044	110.9	243.92		

\**T* test, between countries, significance:  $p < .05$ ; \*\**t* test, between sampled months within a country, where 2014 is the reference year, significance:  $p < .05$ .

TABLE 2. Number of shares of alcohol marketing posts on Facebook and Twitter in Finland and Sweden in 2014–2017

User engagement (shares and retweets)							
Country	Year	Posts ( <i>n</i> )	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Sig1*	Sig2**
Finland	2017	399	0–941	7.1	51.81	.196	.381
	2016	528	0–3,302	11.9	145.48	.511	.195
	2014	360	0–541	5.6	35.35	.313	
Sweden	2017	339	0–455	11.9	48.58		.362
	2016	322	0–1,248	17.9	99.51		.055
	2014	174	0–396	9.2	45.04		

\**T* test, between countries, significance:  $p < .05$ ; \*\**t* test, between sampled months within a country, where 2014 is the reference year, significance:  $p < .05$ .

FIGURE 1. Number of posts on alcohol brands' social media accounts in Finland and Sweden 2014–2017

FIGURE 2. Proportions of posts with content restricted according to Finnish Alcohol Act in Finland and Sweden 2014–2017

FIGURE 3. Proportions of posts with restricted content according to Finnish Alcohol Act in Finnish alcohol marketing posts 2014–2017

FIGURE 4. Proportions of posts with restricted content according to Finnish Alcohol Act in Swedish alcohol marketing posts 2014–2017



Figure 1

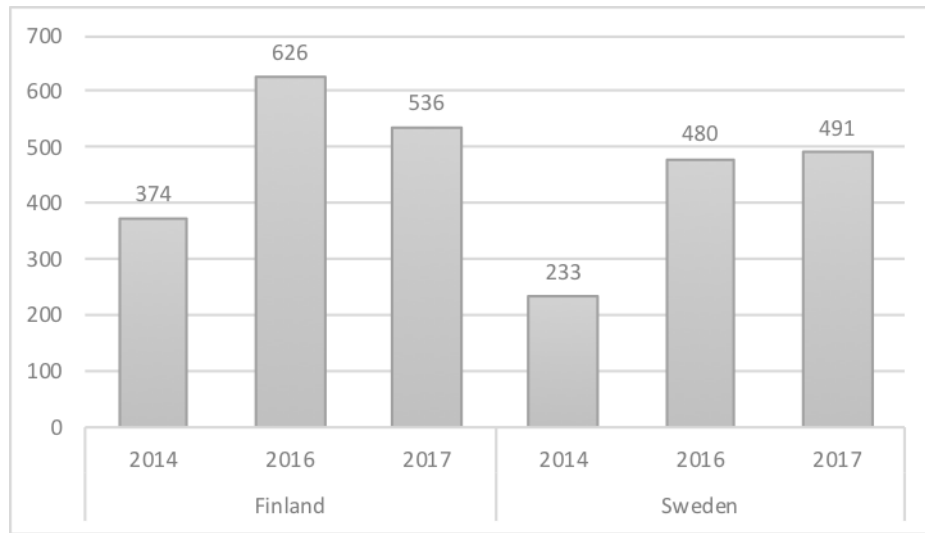


Figure 2

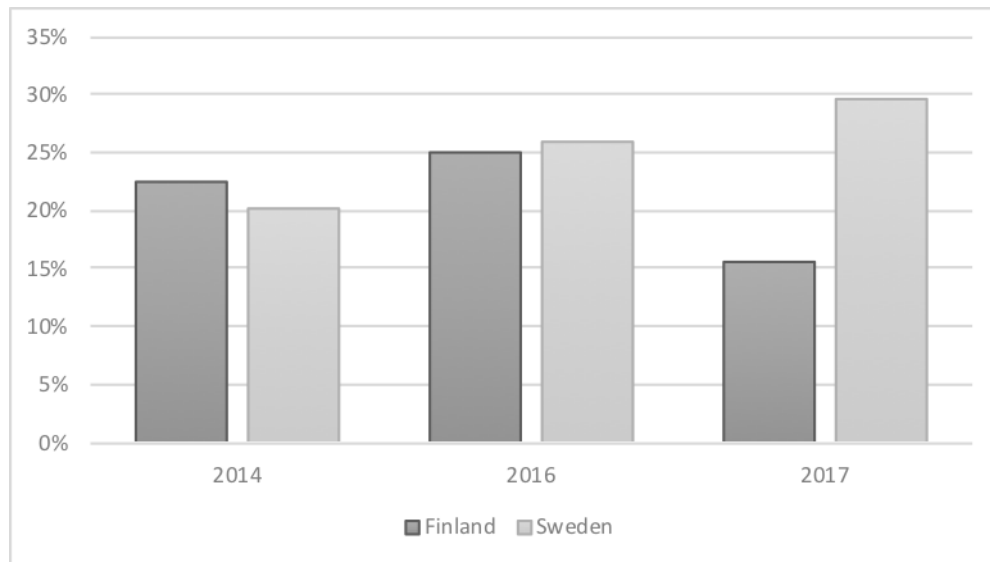


Figure 3

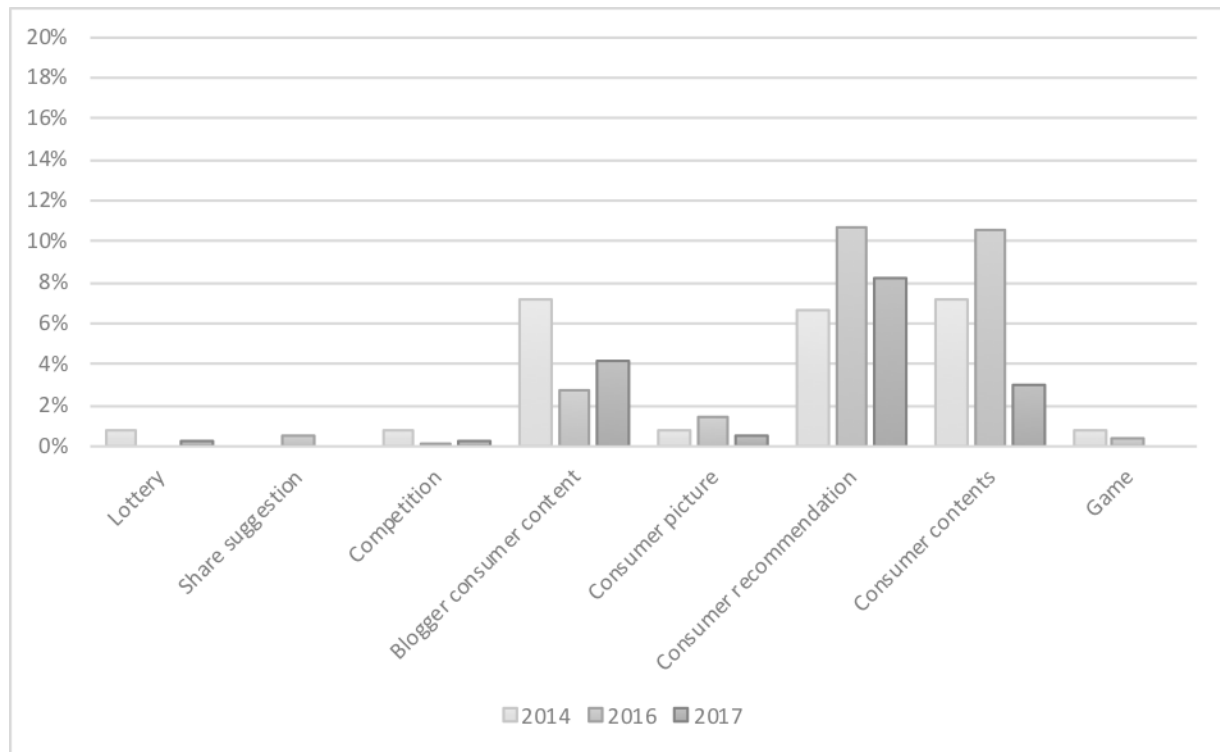


Figure 4

